THE IOWA SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT VISIT PROCESS

STATE OF IOWA
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
GRIMES STATE OFFICE BUILDING
400 E. 14th Street
DES MOINES, IOWA 50319-0146

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LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY

Chapter 256.11 - Iowa Code EDUCATIONAL STANDARDS

The state board shall adopt rules under chapter 17A and a procedure for accrediting all public and nonpublic schools in lowa offering instruction at any or all levels from the pre-kindergarten level through grade twelve. The rules of the state board shall require that a multicultural, gender fair approach is used by schools and school districts. The educational program shall be taught from a multicultural, gender fair approach. Global perspectives shall be incorporated into all levels of the educational program.

The rules adopted by the state board pursuant to section 256.17, Code Supplement 1987, to establish new standards shall satisfy the requirements of this section to adopt rules to implement the educational program contained in this section.

Chapter 256.11 (10).

The state board shall establish an accreditation process for school districts and nonpublic schools seeking accreditation pursuant to this subsection and subsections 11 and 12. By July 1, 1989, all school districts shall meet standards for accreditation. For the school year commencing July 1, 1989, and school years thereafter, the department of education shall use a two-phase process for the continued accreditation of schools and school districts.

Phase I shall consist of annual monitoring by the department of education of all accredited schools and school districts for compliance with accreditation standards adopted by the state board of education as provided in this section. Phase I monitoring requires that accredited schools and school districts annually complete accreditation compliance forms adopted by the state board and file them with the department of education. Phase I monitoring requires a comprehensive desk audit of all accredited schools and school districts including review of accreditation compliance forms, accreditation visit reports, methods of administration reports, and reports submitted in compliance with section 256.7, subsection 21, paragraph "a", and section 280.12.

The department shall conduct site visits to schools and school districts to address accreditation issues identified in the desk audit. Such a visit may be conducted by an individual departmental consultant or may be a comprehensive site visit by a team of departmental consultants and other educational professionals. The purpose of a comprehensive site visit is to determine that a district is in compliance with minimum standards to provide a general assessment of educational practices in a school or school district and make recommendations with regard to the visit findings for the purposes of improving educational practices above the level of minimum compliance. The department shall establish a long-term schedule of site visits that includes visits of all accredited schools and school districts as needed.

PURPOSE OF THE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT SITE VISITS

The purposes of school improvement site visit are found in 281-IAC 12.8(4) (A) (2) of Iowa Administrative Code. The purposes are as follow:

- To assess progress with the comprehensive school improvement plan
- To make recommendations with regard to the visit findings for the purposes of improving educational practices above minimal compliance
- To determine that a school or school district is in compliance with the accreditation standards
- To provide a general assessment of educational practices

PRE-VISIT ACTIVITIES

Site Visit Cycle:

All accredited non-public schools and public school districts receive a school improvement site visit led by lowa Department of Education (DE) staff, with visits occurring on a scheduled cycle (i.e., every five years). The site visit cycle is posted on the DE Web site. Approximately 104 visits are conducted each year, including accredited non-public schools and school districts. The only criterion used for selection is the time since the last site visit.

Of the scheduled public school district site visits scheduled each year, 10 are identified for an indepth focus on equity. The criterion for selecting a district for an indepth focus on equity includes the following:

- Enrollment patterns in career and technical education programs (gender, racial/ethnic background, disability)
- Demographics of the local educational agency (e.g., rapid changes in the demographics of the general or student population)
- Time elapsed since the last on-site review
- Referrals from other lowa Department of Education staff and other state and regional agencies or complaints received from parents, students, staff, applicants for employment, or community representatives

Notification of Visit:

Late spring, each agency receiving an on-site visit during the next school year will be notified by letter. The notification letter includes information about the following:

- Legislative authority and the purpose of the site visit
- Date of the visit
- Parameters of the visit
- Makeup of the visitation team
- Information needed to prepare for the visit
- Overview of the visitation process
- Reference to the DE website address where more specific site visit information is located, such as a document review checklist, groups to be interviewed, model schedules, an interview protocol, and overview presentation guidelines.

Length of Site Visit:

The on-site reviews are typically two to five days in length. This will vary with the size of the agency and whether it is an accredited non-public school or a public school district. Most all non-public school visits are two days in length. Most public school district visits are three days in length. The largest school districts in the state have four or five day visits. If there are unique accreditation issues in a school or district, the length of the visit might be affected.

Site Visit Team Membership:

The number of team members varies depending on the size of the school or district. Most non-public school site visits have two to four team members. Numbers of team members on public school visits range from four to fifteen members depending on the size of the district. A greater number of team members are likely on the largest public school district site visits. The site visit team will be led by a school improvement consultant from the DE, usually the school improvement consultant assigned to the area education agency (AEA) in which the school or district is located. Remaining members of the team come from the DE, AEAs, and local schools and school districts, as required by law. Team membership might also include staff from post-secondary institutions and state educational organizations (e.g., lowa Association of School Boards). Team member registration is accomplished through the DE Web site from May to September.

Site Visit Schedule:

Much of the site visit schedule will consist of staff interviews, review of documents, and observations during building tours. Each visit commences with a brief team orientation, followed by a district overview presentation, and ends with "Site Visit Highlights," a summarization of the more significant visit findings. Team meetings are built into the schedule each day to allow time for team dialogue and consensus building on report statements. Some interviews are scheduled separately to gain specific information about special education, career and technical education, state-wide voluntary four-year old preschool program, and equity.

School, School District, and Team Member Orientation:

Orientation sessions are held for schools and districts receiving a site visit, as well as for team members. Orientation sessions are typically conducted in September and October. A choice of attending a face-to-face training or a training held over the Iowa Communications Network (ICN) is provided. Face-to-face trainings are conducted in each AEA by the DE school improvement consultant assigned to the AEA. ICN trainings are conducted by volunteer DE school improvement consultants. A Power-Point presentation guides the orientation sessions. Time is provided during the orientation sessions to review the interview process, document review process, sample site visit schedules, report development process, and other school and district issues about which team members should be aware. An additional face-to-face training is held for school districts receiving a site visit with an in-depth focus on equity, as well as an opportunity to receive that training via the ICN.

Components of the Site Visit:

Activities and processes that are consistently implemented in all site visits include document review, school/district overview, interviews, building tours, written report of findings, and site visit highlights shared at the conclusion of the site visit. On all public school district site visits, attention

to equity, federal title programs, special education, and career and technical education is incorporated with more limited incorporation of these areas on non-public school visits as appropriate.

• Document Review – Items included in the document review are primarily based in Chapter 12 of Iowa Administrative Code requirements, as well as some requirements based in federal law. For example, Chapter 12 requirements that are reviewed include attendance center, program, and course enrollment data by race, national origin, gender, and disability; selected school board policies; school calendar; administrator and teacher personnel evaluation; the elementary, middle school/junior high school, and high school programs; documentation regarding the vocational advisory committee; documentation regarding the school district's special education program and services; documentation regarding the school district's gifted and talented and at-risk programs; documentation regarding curriculum and professional development; documentation regarding the school or school district's School Improvement Advisory Committee; and personnel and student records. Documents are also reviewed regarding homeless children and youth, English as a Second Language, technology, Safe and Drug-Free Schools program, unsafe school choice option, and Wellness policy required through federal law. All of these elements are reviewed on public school district site visits, with some exceptions to this listing on non-public school site visits.

Additional documents reviewed during an in-depth equity site visit include non-discrimination grievance procedures, affirmative action plan, counseling materials, employment application, and personnel evaluation forms.

- District Overview Schools and school districts provide an overview of their educational programs at the beginning of the site visit. School leaders share accomplishments, areas of challenge, demographics of the district, progress with recommendations and non-compliances from the last comprehensive site visit, and information about the school's or district's Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program and applicable information. School leaders are provided a suggested outline by the DE to help organize thinking and planning for the overview. The outline usually follows the organizing format of the site visit report, including bulleted descriptors of each component.
- Interviews -- Interviews are an essential element of the site visit process. The convergence between what team members learn through documentation and what they hear district stakeholders say provide validation that what team members include in the report is accurate. Interview groups include the following: administrators, school board members, general education teachers, special education teachers and collaborating teachers, high school and middle school students, instructional support staff, non-instructional support staff, school advisory committees (i.e., School Improvement Advisory and Career and Technical Education Advisory members), learning supports staff, parents, and (optional) community groups. Public school district site visit schedules include a separate interview with the district's special education director/coordinator. Site visits with an in-depth focus on equity include separately scheduled interviews with the district equity coordinator; guidance counselors; teachers of English as a Second Language, gifted and talented, and at-risk; school nurse; athletic director, activity director, coaches, and physical education teachers; and human resources director.

- Observations Building tours are currently part of the site visit. The purpose of this
 experience is to enhance team members' contextual understanding of the school or school
 district. The information is not used for evaluation and is not directly referenced in the site visit
 report. Building tours are viewed as a way to recognize school staff for their efforts in
 preparation for the site visit and to provide a snapshot of the school or school district.
- Team Consensus Team members contribute to the development of the site visit report. Team members create statements of strength and recommendations for improvement based on the synthesis of documentation, interviews, and observations. Once the statements have been drafted, the team leader leads team members through a consensus process by reading each statement in the report. If consensus cannot be reached, the team leader makes the final decision on a particular statement's inclusion or exclusion from the report.

Post-Review Activities

About six weeks after the site visit, an official report is sent to the school or school district's school board president and the superintendent (public school) or principal (non-public school). During the intervening time, the site visit team leader has edited the report draft and shared the report with at least two others for editing (content, clarity, grammar, and mechanics). When a district has received a site visit that includes an in-depth focus on equity, a separate report regarding equity issues is sent at the same time as the comprehensive site visit report.

- Organization of Site Visit Report The components of the site visit report have evolved over time. The site visit report is currently organized around seven themes of improved schools (i.e., mission, vision, and goals; leadership; collaborative relationships; learning environment, curriculum and instruction; professional development; and monitoring and accountability). The site visit report format was determined as a result of over eighteen months of studying research regarding improved schools. Non-compliances are noted at the end of the report through the Chapter 12 Non-compliance Matrix and the Outside of Chapter 12 Matrix.
- Statement Regarding Accreditation During the 2008-2009 site visit season, the DE initiated placing a statement in the site visit report cover letter regarding the school or school district's accreditation. Since dissolution of a district may be initiated through Chapter 12 or through a downward trend in a school district's finances, it became reasonable to notify the district of its accreditation standing, in part, to alert the district and the State Board of Education well in advance of initiating a Phase II process (see below) and providing opportunity for the school district to take corrective actions. Site visit reports contain one of the three statements below:
 - Statement A Based on the findings from a comprehensive site visit, including a
 desk audit, on-site document review, and interviews, the local public school
 district/accredited non-public school maintains State of lowa accreditation. No
 non-compliance issues are noted and no corrective action plan is required.

OR

Statement B – Based on the findings from a comprehensive site visit, including a
desk audit, on-site document review, and interviews, the local public school

district/accredited non-public school maintains State of Iowa accreditation upon resolution of non-compliance issues described in the Chapter 12 Non-compliance Matrix and the Outside of Chapter 12 Non-compliance Matrix included in the comprehensive site visit report. The district/school must complete corrective actions according to the timeline noted. DE follow-up will be conducted to verify resolution of all noted non-compliance issues.

OR

- Statement C Based on the findings from a comprehensive site visit, including a
 desk audit, on-site document review, and interviews, the local public school
 district's/accredited non-public school's accreditation is compromised. Details
 regarding the non-compliance issues and areas of concern are contained in this
 report. The Department will conduct on-going follow-up to monitor district progress.
 The district/school is hereby notified that failure to resolve the issues according to
 an approved corrective action plan with timelines places the district's/school's
 accreditation in jeopardy.
- Compliance Plan -- The school or school district has 45 days after receiving the site visit
 report to submit a plan of correction noting the corrective action that will be taken, the
 evidence of correction that will be submitted, and a timeline for completion. Licensure noncompliances must be immediately corrected which may include removing the noncompliant teachers from the noted assignments.

Monitoring Corrections – The site visit team leader (DE School Improvement Consultant) is responsible for monitoring site visit non-compliances. If the corrective action plan is not received within 45 days of the site visit report being sent to the school or school district, the School Improvement Consultant notifies the district. After evidence of corrective action has been received for all non-compliances noted, the School Improvement Consultant notifies the school or school district in writing (e-mail or U.S. mail) that the school or school district is in compliance with the items specified in the site visit report.

Beginning fall 2008, if non-compliances noted in the site visit report warrant, the School Improvement Consultant may elect to follow-up with the district through a phone call, email, or face-to-face meeting with district officials until the school or school district's next site visit. Such action is determined through the selection of the site visit report statement denoting the school or school district's accreditation status. Furthermore, when recommendations or non-compliances noted in a cycle's site visit report continue to surface in the next cycle's site visit, the site visit report will note such occurrence. This action is taken in an effort to alert the school or school district that inability to continuously improve is noted and can serve as further justification to initiate a Phase II (see below) visit.

Consequences of Continued Non-Compliance/Phase II

If a school or school district is unable to comply or refuses to comply with requirements, it would initiate Phase II of the accreditation process. Phase II requires the use of an accreditation committee, appointed by the Director of the Department of Education, to conduct an on-site visit, if any of the following conditions exist:

- When either the annual monitoring or the biennial on-site visit of Phase I indicates that a school or school district is deficient and fails to come into compliance with accreditation standards.
- In response to a petition requesting a Phase II visit that is signed by eligible electors residing
 in the school district equal in number to at least twenty percent of the registered voters of the
 school district and filed with the Director.
- In response to a petition filed with the Director requesting such a committee visitation that is signed by twenty percent or more of the parents or guardians who have children enrolled in the school or school district.
- The State Board of Education may direct that a Phase II visit is conducted.

Appendix

The following documents related to the School Improvement Site Visit Process can be found on the Department of Education website at www.iowa.gov/educate. The school improvement documents can be located using the Quick Links alphabetical index under school improvement. The Equity Review documents can be located by using the Quick Links alphabetical index under equity education.

- **1. Public School Site Visit Schedule**: This document includes the schedule for School Improvement Site Visits through 2014.
- 2. Model School Improvement Visit Schedule with List of Required Interviews: This document includes a link to generic model schedules for a visit. School districts adapt the model in putting together a schedule for their district. A list of staff members that must be interviewed on each visit is included.
- 3. Public School Document Review Checklist, Non-public School document Review Checklist: These documents include a list of the documents which must be available and reviewed during the course of an on-site visit.
- 4. School Improvement Conversation Starters for Public and Non-Public School Visit Interviews: This document includes common questions that are asked for each required interview conducted during the on-site visit.
- **5. LEA Site Visit Training Slide Show:** This document includes the Power Point slideshow that is used by Department Staff when conducting the orientation to the School Improvement Site-Visit Process.
- 6. District Overview Presentation Guidelines: This document presents guidance to school districts on what content to include in the District's presentation to the visitation team at the beginning of the site visit, as well as a list of the seven themes of improving schools and school districts with descriptors. The seven themes serve as the organizer for the site visit report.
- 7. Educational Equity Review: Information for School Districts: This document presents an over-view of the Equity Review Process. Equity reviews are conducted concurrently with school improvement visits in some school districts each year.
- 8. Educational Equity Review Guide & On-Site Manual K-12: This document is completed by equity team members during an equity visit. It may also be used as a self evaluation tool by school districts.
- The Equity Data Needs Manual: Data other than BEDS data, which is needed to conduct an Equity Review